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Running Like a Dry Creek?

By Irving Kristol

It was back in 1948, and Tom Dewey looked like a certain winner against an incumbent Harry Truman, whose administration was rocked by several scandals and was seemingly unable to bring inflation under control. But as the campaign entered its final stage, the New York Daily News, which supported Dewey, sensed the emergence of an ominous subterranean countercurrent of opinion. It was then that it published its famous editorial titled "Running Like a Dry Creek." It implored Dewey to start campaigning hard, on issues, instead of simply sitting on his hands and waiting for the election returns. He didn't (perhaps couldn't) and Truman won an upset victory.

The Reagan administration, it seems to me, is falling into the same trap. On the assumption that the economic recovery will continue unperturbed through 1984, it is relying on a strategy—to use a metaphor familiar to football and basketball fans—of "eating up the clock." This is the phrase used to describe a team which, trying to protect a lead, plays defensively and risklessly. More often than not, the strategy does not work. The momentum, the spirit that prevails, moves over to its opponents. And once surrendered, that momentum becomes fiendishly difficult to retrieve.

Resolute, Articulate Leadership

Even if the administration's assumption about a sustained economic recovery is true, the political inferences drawn from it are surely false. Contrary to an opinion widespread among professional politicians, political scientists and the media, the majority of citizens in a modern democracy are not economic determinists. While they are unquestionably concerned about "pocketbook issues," they are even more interested in being governed by a resolute, self-confident, articulate leadership—a leadership that knows where it is headed and can explain in a forthright way just how it proposes to get there. The election of Margaret Thatcher—whose popularity had been steadily climbing even before the Falklands War, despite horrible economic conditions—demonstrates that convincingly enough.

Such resolute, articulate leadership is precisely the opposite of the kind of "pragmatic," managerial posture the Reagan administration has by now assumed. It does not mean a refusal to compromise when necessary, since compromise is an inherent part of the democratic political process. It does mean, however, that compromise should be presented candidly to the public for what it is—compromise, not victory. It also means that prior to any compromise the issues should be defined in a clear-cut way, not fudged. The hope, of course, is that public opinion would then be mobilized to a degree that would either make compromise unnecessary or the terms more favorable.

The Reagan administration is already, relatively early in the game, losing its momentum. It is reacting to events, not shaping them. It is reacting to its critics, not outdistancing them. It spends all of its time and energy putting out fires, while the political arsonists—Republican as well as Democratic—go merrily on their way. So it is not at all surprising that the electorate is in the process of forgetting to give the administration credit for the success of its economic policies and is provided with no reasons to give the administration credit for its foreign policies either, to the degree that it deserves such credit.

The "pragmatic" inertia that characterizes the administration shows itself in all sorts of ways. The recent debate on the War Powers Act, and on the presence of American troops as part of an international force in Lebanon, is a case in point. Critics of the administration talk incessantly about the possibility of another Vietnam. In response, the White House and the State Department weakly reply that we have no intention of getting so deeply involved.

No wonder the American people are so profoundly baffled, so uneasy, about the situation in Lebanon. The question we keep asking ourselves is: What exactly are we doing there? It's the right question and deserves a far less ambiguous answer than we have so far received. The answer, moreover, would have to take the form of decisive action, not mere rhetoric.

If, as is quite obviously the case, our Marines are there to support and strengthen a "moderate" regime (i.e., one that is not anti-American and anti-Western) and to deny a pro-Soviet Syria hegemony over the area, why haven't we used our military force to achieve those ends? Surely we can project sufficient military force, and use it if necessary, to "persuade" the Syrians to withdraw, along with the Israelis. If we are really too weak to do that, we shouldn't be there at all.

The lesson of Vietnam, properly understood, is that American involvement in these "frontier wars" should be swift, powerful, and decisive—or not at all. Democracies cannot for long tolerate "limited" wars in far-off places, under circumstances that are, more likely than not, ambiguous and confusing.

What is true for Lebanon also holds for El Salvador. It is absurd and sickening to see this administration getting bogged down in congressional debates over whether we should place 55 military advisors there or 75. A great power that conducts its foreign affairs in this way loses all credibility in the world.

Our military intervention in Central America should have been of such a nature and dimension to constrain Nicaragua and Cuba from arming the rebel groups in El Salvador and to give the popularly elected government of that country a decisive military advantage over its "Marxist" enemies. Had we done so, we would by now have been able to declare a "victory." As it is, even if our current minimalist policy should work over the next year, the administration will get no credit for it, since no one will clearly remember or understand just what did happen down there.

On the question of arms control, too, the administration has permitted itself to be put on the defensive from the outset, where it has remained ever since. To some degree, this is because we have allowed our words and our actions to be contorted out of any recognizable shape by the demands and plaints of our North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies. But leadership in an alliance consists in knowing when to ignore your allies, as well as when to consult with them.

The actual issue at stake in the arms-control negotiations that have been under way for so many months now is as clear as can be. The Soviets are insisting that at all military levels, nuclear and non-nuclear, their strength should be at parity with that of the U.S. and its European allies. This means, of course, that the Soviets are insisting on superiority vis-a-vis the U.S. alone. A president who took this issue, in these terms, to the American people would discover that such "parity" is utterly unacceptable. But neither Mr. Reagan nor Mr. Shultz has done any such thing. Instead, they keep coming up with one "concession" after another—which only makes it appear that we were being unreasonable in the first place.

The same lack of initiative and boldness has been visible in domestic policy. It was a major strategic error for the administration to attempt to cut the budget line by line, discrete program by program. Perhaps the first such effort was worth the attempt. But it quickly became clear that the active and energetic supporters of particular programs will always be strong enough to defeat even an American majority who wish, in a general sense, to reduce federal expenditures. The only way to cut the budget is across the board, slicing, say,

3% from every program, regardless of its merits or demerits. The American people certainly do want a cut in federal expenditures, and it is not easy to argue that a 3% cut in any single program will have any terrible consequences. But instead of striking out on this bold path, the administration has been thrashing about in legislative quicksand, as it tries (unsuccessfully) to chip a few hundred million dollars here and another few hundred million dollars there. As a result, it has had to accept a 3% cut where it least wanted one: in defense, while other outlays roll onward and upward.

Even the strong economic recovery may not redound to the credit of the administration, especially since it permitted that original tax cut to be eroded by Sen. Robert Dole's ludicrous 1982 tax increase (whatever happened to that money?) and accepted, from a bipartisan commission, a rise in Social Security taxes.

What the American people need to hear is an unequivocal reassurance that this recovery will not abort—that the president will do whatever is necessary, whether it be across-the-board cuts in expenditures or a new series of tax cuts, or both, to keep our economic growth on an upward trend. The recovery may not be as fragile as many people (including many economists) think, but that they think so is a fact, and it is a fact that needs to be addressed.

Enamored of Commissions

It is only such a reorientation of the administration's strategy, at home and abroad, that will permit it to regain its lost momentum. Alas, there are no signs that the White House has any such reorientation in mind.

On the contrary, it seems to have become enamored of commissions and task forces as convenient receptacles for controversial issues it prefers to duck—there is talk of a new commission on the budget deficit—or for issues that shouldn't even be on its agenda in the first place. On this latter score, one has just witnessed the creation of a new task force on "domestic violence," i.e., wife abuse, child abuse, and mistreatment of the elderly by their offspring. "The federal government must now take a leading role" in coping with this problem, the attorney general has solemnly declared. The leading role, presumably, will involve a new bureaucracy and new appropriations.

To hear such inane liberal chatter from the Reagan administration is proof positive that this administration has lost its way. As a consequence, the odds against its reelection are becoming more formidable with every passing week.

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